



PRESS RELEASE

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U.S. ATTORNEY ANNOUNCES NO CHARGES IN CONNECTION WITH THE CHEDISKI WILDFIRE

PHOENIX, ARIZONA -- Paul K. Charlton, United States Attorney for the District of Arizona announced his decision to not file federal criminal charges against Valinda Jo Elliott in connection with the Chediski Forest Fire, indicating that there was insufficient evidence of criminal intent, coupled with credible evidence of a "necessity" defense, which precluded the filing of such charges.

This decision was made only after a very careful and thorough review of the investigative process and the applicable laws. The investigation required follow up on numerous tips which had been received from a variety of sources. Many of these tips ultimately proved groundless.

The investigation in this case included interviews of Ransford Olmsted, Valinda Jo Elliott, various witnesses, and a review of physical evidence and telephone records. This was a cooperative investigation conducted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the United States Forest Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That investigation indicated that Valinda Jo Elliott and Ransford Olmsted left Phoenix on June 18, 2002 at approximately 9:00 am, heading to Young, Arizona, where Olmsted was to repair a pool table and collect money from other arcade machines.

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At approximately 11:30 am, Olmsted missed the turnoff near Roosevelt Lake and instead ended up in Salt River Canyon. While in Salt River Canyon, Olmsted stopped at a store where he purchased a map and received directions to Young through Cibique, Arizona.

At approximately 12:30 pm Olmsted took State Route 12 A instead of State Route 12 and became lost. His pickup was running low on gas. During the next several hours Olmsted and Elliott drove down various side roads off of State Route 12A trying to find their way out.

Between 4:13 pm and 4:25 pm Elliott called the Arizona State Park Service six times on her cellular phone. On the sixth call, she got through and was told to call the Tonto National Forest. At 4:27 pm on June 18th, Elliott called the Tonto National Forest Service twice. Both times she received a recorded message. At 4:30 pm on the 18th, Elliot called the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Again she received a recorded message.

By 5:30 pm on June 18th, Olmsted continued to drive but remained lost. His gas warning light indicated that he was low on fuel. Olmsted and Elliott decided to sleep in the truck that night. By this time, Olmsted's cellular phone was dead.

On June 19, 2002, at approximately 6:30 am Elliott decided to leave Olmsted at the truck while she set off for higher ground in an attempt to get a signal on her cellular phone. Between 7:26 am and 7:40 am on June 19th, Elliott called 911 six times. Each time she lost the signal and was unable to reach an operator. Eventually, Elliott's cellular phone battery died.

After climbing the mountain to make the calls, Elliott was unable to find her way back to Olmsted's truck. Much of the rest of June 19th, 2002, she continued searching for Olmsted while Olmsted was also looking for her. At one point on the 19th, Olmsted drove his truck a distance while searching for Elliott but ran out of gas. He then walked for several hours before being picked up by four men who gave him a ride to get gas and then returned him to his truck. Subsequent investigation by law enforcement

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officials confirmed that Olmsted walked approximately 36 miles the day of June 19th before being rescued.

At approximately 10:30 pm on June 19th Olmsted put gasoline in his truck and continued looking for Elliott. By 1:47 am on June 20, after being unable to located Elliott, Olmsted drove to Cibique and filed a missing persons report with an Officer of the White Mountain Game and Fish Department. Thereafter, both the Officer and Olmsted continue to search for Elliott.

At 6:50 am on June 20, 2002, Elliott spotted a news helicopter flying overhead. She used a cigarette lighter to light a small bush on fire in a sparsely forested area in order to signal the helicopter. At 7:00 am the helicopter landed and rescued Elliott. Elliott told the helicopter crew about the fire and asked that it be put out. She was told that the authorities were notified of the fire and that it would be "taken care of." Elliott was then taken for medical treatment.

In announcing his decision, U.S. Attorney Charlton said, *"the devastation wrought by the Chediski fire produced in all of us intense emotions and a great deal of anger. The decision in this case was not an easy one and reached only after a thorough and complete investigation into the terrible fire and the applicable law. Due to a lack of proof of criminal intent and the presence of facts supporting a necessity defense I have decided not to file charges in this matter."*

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